

Lenin and Russia
1917-1928.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks had forced themselves into power in October 1917, yet there were only about 250,000 Bolsheviks in the whole of Russia. The First World War was still raging, and starvation threatened the country. The Bolsheviks controlled Petrograd, but in other places their takeover was not so easy. The Moscow Soviet only won control of the city after several days of fighting. It seemed impossible that Lenin could hold on to power. However, he did hold on with ruthless determination. He was sure that the Bolsheviks must win and that history and the Russian people would prove that his ideas were right.

THE BOLSHEVIK Revolution.

As soon as the new Bolshevik government was formed, Lenin made many new laws.

All classes and class divisions, all class privileges and ranks are abolished. There is established the general title of Citizen of the Russian Republic. All ranks and grades in the army, beginning with the rank of corporal and ending with the rank of general, are abolished. The army of the Russian Republic now consists of free and equal citizens.

Private property in land is hereby abolished. All land is declared to be the property of the whole toiling people. All citizens who are willing to till the land, either by themselves or in groups, are entitled to its use.

The Soviet laws on workers' control are confirmed as a first step to transforming the factories, workshops, mines, railways and other means of production of the Workers and Peasant State.

The passing of all banks into the possession of the Workers' and Peasants' State is confirmed as one of the conditions for freeing the toiling masses from the burden of capitalism. The Workers' and Peasants' Government calls upon all peoples and governments to start immediate negotiations for peace. We appeal to the workers of England, France and Germany.

The Soviet of People's Commissars decrees that . . . those newspapers and magazines will be closed which call for open opposition to the Workers' and Peasants' Government, encourage treason by frankly slanderous distortion of the facts.

The Cheka, the Secret Police, ask all local soviets to seek out, arrest and shoot immediately all agents of enemy spies, speculators, organisers of revolts, and buyers and sellers of arms.

Other decrees gave women equal rights. Divorce was made easy, free education for all was planned, and some of the minority peoples in Russia – for example, the Ukrainians and Georgians - were offered more independence.

Lenin tried to deal with the shortage of food in towns by sending soldiers out into the countryside to seize grain. This often left the peasants without enough to live on and without seed-corn to plant. He defended this

by the Marxist theory of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat'. The Bolsheviks claimed to represent the proletariat, the working people. Until this was accepted by everyone, it would be necessary, Lenin said, for the Bolshevik Party to act as a dictator.

Most of the Bolshevik supporters in Russia were in the army, the navy and among the workers of Moscow and Petrograd. They therefore controlled the important centres of power. The Bolsheviks used the telegraph to spread revolution. They telegraphed the revolutionary decrees out to the cities, towns and villages of Russia, hoping that local groups would act on them. Some of the decrees did not really follow strict Marxist theory. Lenin passed them in order to win the support of the peasants, as the Bolsheviks had few supporters in rural areas.

Assembly elections.

This lack of support was seen very clearly in the elections for the Assembly held in January 1918. Many Russians had wanted free elections for what would be their first real parliament. Since Lenin had blamed Kerensky for not calling elections quickly enough after the March Revolution, he could hardly put them off now that he was in power. In the elections, the Bolsheviks only won 175 seats out of 707. Most seats went to the Social Revolutionary Party (SR), which had support among the peasants. This clearly showed how little support the Bolsheviks had outside the cities.

When the Assembly met for its first session, Lenin ordered armed Bolshevik Red Guards to surround the building. After this session, the first freely elected assembly in Russia's history was closed. It was never allowed to meet again. Trotsky's words show the Bolsheviks' attitude to the Assembly: 'You are a mere handful, miserable and bankrupt. You may go where you belong, to the rubbish-heap of history!'

Lenin's policy of the dictatorship of the proletariat thus made many enemies. Not only those who wanted the Tsar back, but many who had supported the March Revolution of 1917 only ten months earlier now turned against the Bolsheviks.

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 1918.

Lenin had hoped that the Russian Revolution would spark off revolutions all over Europe. He thought that this would bring an end to the First World War, as the soldiers of all the armies would refuse to fight. This did not happen. The Russians had opened peace talks with the Germans soon after the revolution. They deliberately kept the talks going on for as long as they could, hoping for the expected revolution. In the end, the Germans lost patience and forced Trotsky, Lenin's representative, to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This treaty was very harsh on Russia, but Lenin had no choice but to accept it. The Russian army was crumbling, and he had promised peace to the soldiers.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk took away 25% of Russia's population, 25% of the railway system, 35% of the grain-producing area and 70% of the industry. As you can see from the map, some of this land was to be returned to Russia by the Treaty of Versailles.

Britain and France were angry with Russia for leaving the war. They considered that Russia had broken the treaties it had made with them before 1914. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk gave Germany a sudden advantage: thousands of German troops would be taken from the Russian Front and sent by train to strengthen the German army on the Western Front. Grain from Russian corn lands helped ease the growing hunger in Germany caused by the naval blockade. Britain and France began to look for ways of opening up the Eastern Front again. They made contact with the Bolsheviks' enemies within Russia.

The Civil war.

From 1918 to 1921, Russia suffered a terrible civil war. The Bolsheviks in 1918 controlled only the areas round Moscow and Petrograd. They were now attacked by their many enemies. The Bolsheviks were called 'Reds', since red is the colour of the Communist flag. Their opponents were called 'Whites'. This name was about all the Whites had in common: there were Tsarists and Liberals, Social Revolutionaries and Anarchists (those who believed all types of government were wrong). At the same time, local groups took advantage of the chaos to set up their own governments. All they wanted was to be free of control from Moscow. At one time, there were 30 separate governments controlling various parts of Russia.

The Whites were also helped by several countries: Britain, France, the USA and Japan. At first, these countries hoped to open up the Eastern Front with Germany again. Later, they wanted to crush the new Communist state to prevent its ideas from spreading. Russia was also invaded by Finland and Poland during the civil war. To the dismay of the Bolsheviks a large number of Czech prisoners of war, held in Central Siberia, took the law into their own hands: they demanded to be sent home but refused to hand over the weapons they had seized. For a while, they controlled large sections of the Trans-Siberian railway.

A Red Army had to be put together if the Bolshevik State was to survive. Leon Trotsky, the brilliant organiser of the October Revolution, took on the task. Nearly all the officers of the Russian army of 1914, 1918 were Tsarists and had either fled or stayed to fight for the Whites, so he had to start almost from scratch.

Trotsky himself spent the years of the civil war rushing from front to front in a special train.

He made sure that supplies were available. Later, he took on ex-Tsarist officers, but attached a Communist Party Commissar to each one to ensure that they stayed loyal. Fortunately for Trotsky, the Whites did not act together. The Czech forces were defeated at Kazan late in 1918. In 1919 and 1920, the Red Army dealt one by one with the forces of General Denikin in the south, General Yudenich in the west and Admiral Kolchak in the east.

In 1918, a nervous Bolshevik commander at Ekaterinburg, keen to weaken the Tsarist cause, ordered the Tsar and all his family shot. Cruelty towards prisoners and civilians was soon common

on both sides. The foreign powers were sickened by this and by the divisions among the Whites. By 1920, they had withdrawn their support, and the White forces crumbled away.

War communism.

Meanwhile, Lenin's government was prepared to go to any lengths to win the war. His ruthless policy in these years was called 'War Communism'. This stated that everyone between 16 and 60 had to work, except the ill, and pregnant women. Workers could be sent to work anywhere in the country. Strikes were illegal. Food Detachments of 75 men with two machine-guns were sent into the countryside to seize food. The Red Army was allowed to take any supplies it needed. Anyone suspected of opposition, or hoarding food or failing to co-operate, could be arrested and shot by the Cheka.

Why did the Reds win the Civil War?

The main reasons for the Reds' successes were that the White forces did not act together, whereas the Reds were united under Trotsky's command. The White armies were hundreds of kilometres apart, and they found it difficult to get supplies. The Reds held the heartland of Russia, which included most of the railway system, so their supply system was better. The Whites seized anything they wanted in the way of food or horses from the local people. The Reds did very much the same, but the Whites seem to have been hated more.

This was probably because the Whites were mainly upper-class Russians and because they had foreign help.

The average Russian was very patriotic, and, in this situation, the Reds seemed the more patriotic side. Young men joined the Red Army to fight for Russia and for Communism against the foreigners and the Tsarists. The ruthless efficiency of 'War Communism' ensured that Trotsky had the supplies he needed.

Famine, 1921.

By 1921, Russia was in a state of total collapse after seven hard years of war. The First World War and then the civil war had disrupted life to such an extent that land was not being farmed. War Communism had brought passive resistance from the peasants. They could not fight the Food Detachments, but they could refuse to farm the land. They saw little point in growing crops only to have the harvest taken away from them.

Towns were deserted as people went into the countryside to look for food. Those who remained were sometimes too weak to work. Workers' control brought chaos to factories and railways. Agricultural production was down by 50%, and industrial production down by 90% compared to the 1913 figure. In addition to all this, there was a drought in 1921.

In early 1921 there was a mutiny among the sailors at the naval base at Kronstadt, near Petrograd. They called for a third revolution, more free elections, free speech and free trade unions. These were not Whites, but men who had supported the Bolsheviks from the beginning. Now they were disgusted with the rules of War Communism and the state of Russia. Trotsky ordered his Red Army to crush the mutiny. It was a bloody battle and was followed by more executions.

New Economic Policy (NEP).

The Kronstadt mutiny and the sorry state of the country led Lenin to introduce changes. He backed down from pure Communist or Marxist doctrine and let aspects of capitalism return.

Was NEP a success?

Peasants were allowed to farm their own land and sell their own produce. The government took a percentage of their produce as tax. The more they produced, the more they could keep. Peasants were allowed to hire labourers to work for them. Gradually, a class of better-off peasants, the kulaks, began to appear. This practice was against all the principles of Communism, but farming soon recovered, production passed the 1913 figure and there was food on sale again in the towns.

people were also allowed to run small businesses again. Shops, small factories and trades began to flourish. Lenin kept what he called 'the commanding heights of the economy' in the hands of the state. These were the vital heavy industries – coal, iron and steel – together with railways, shipping and banking. Yet even here some of the principles of Communism were broken. High salaries were paid to experts to run the factories, and bonuses were paid to those who met high production targets.

Death of Lenin.

In 1918 a Social Revolutionary called Dora Kaplan had fired several shots at Lenin. Unfortunately, the doctors were forced to leave two bullets in his body. In 1922, he suffered a stroke and never fully recovered. He died in January 1924.

Lenin's incredible energy and determination had changed the history of the world. He had organised the Bolshevik Party until it was ready for

revolution. He had called for a second revolution in 1917, and he had led the Bolshevik state through the difficulties of its first seven years.

He was responsible for setting up the Cheka and the labour camps.

he did not carry out personal attacks on private enemies.

Before he died, Lenin wrote:

Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary, has concentrated enormous power in his hands. I am not sure that he always knows how to use that power wisely. On the other hand, Comrade Trotsky is probably the most able man in the Central Committee, but too self-confident, too much attracted by administration.

Stalin is too crude and this fault is very bad in a General Secretary. Therefore I propose to comrades to find a way to remove Stalin and appoint a man more patient, more loyal, more polite, more attentive to comrades.'

Lenin was only 53 when he died. His death left the Party with the problem of who was to follow him. Trotsky was clearly the most able of the Communist leaders: he had organised the October Revolution and the Red Army brilliantly. However, the other Communist leaders were afraid of him. They thought he might become another Napoleon, turning the principles of the revolution to his own glory. So they ignored Lenin's warning about Stalin. A struggle for power between Stalin and Trotsky lasted for four years.

Gradually, Stalin emerged as the leading figure. Stalin did not seem important at first.

He had taken on the dull and hard work of General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party. From there, he put his supporters into key posts all over the country. Trotsky did not think it necessary to make allies among the other Communists. The struggle was carried on over policies: Trotsky wanted to press on with 'World Revolution.

Stalin joined the group wanting to establish 'Socialism in one country, that is Russia first.

Trotsky found himself isolated. He was dismissed from all his posts in 1927. The next year, he was sent to Siberia and finally exiled from Russia completely in 1929. Stalin was then able to remove all other leaders from key positions so that he was in complete control.